Fact Sheet
West Coast Steelhead
March 1998

Background: The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) conducted its first comprehensive scientific review of steelhead along the U.S. West Coast beginning in 1994. It has continually updated this review as new information has become available. Coast-wide there are 15 distinct groups, or evolutionarily significant units (ESUs), of steelhead, from the Canadian border to southern California and extending east to the Rocky Mountains. In August 1997, NMFS announced several decisions on steelhead. Five ESUs (see West Coast steelhead status map) were listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as threatened or endangered, and four were considered not at risk and were not listed. One was designated a "candidate" for listing, because information was lacking to clarify its status.

A decision on the five remaining steelhead ESUs was deferred for six months, because of scientific uncertainty regarding their status. In a related action, on February 26, 1998, NMFS proposed protection under the ESA for the candidate ESU and the upper Willamette ESU (one of four previously not a risk). The agency will make a final decision on these two ESUs in 1999.

Today's finding covers the five deferred steelhead ESUs.

Special Features: Steelhead are the premier freshwater gamefish along the West Coast. They depend more on fresh water than most salmon species. They generally rely on rivers and streams as their nursery areas. Steelhead typically use headwater areas more than other salmon species but, unlike others, they usually don't die after spawning.

Scientific Findings:

Central California Valley ESU, threatened: Steelhead are gone from 80-90 percent of their range, primarily because of habitat blockages (dams), water diversions, and reduced water quality (urban development, logging, and mining).
* Transfers of hatchery fish from outside the area threaten locally adapted fish.
* Sacramento River steelhead are in long-term decline (1967-1993), with fewer than 2000 wild fish in the upper Sacramento in 1994.

Northern California ESU, candidate: There is limited information on ESU health.
* Eel River winter-run in long-term decline; hatchery fish comprise more than 90 percent of returns.
* Eel Upper River winter- and summer-run combined totaled 400 fish recently.
* Mad River summer-run has a high proportion of hatchery fish.
* Prairie Creek winter-run has recently increased, but population is small.
* Continued transfers of non-native hatchery fish (primarily Mad River stock to other streams) threatens local populations' special adaptations to survive.

Klamath Mountains Province ESU, candidate: Mixed indicators of ESU health.
In Oregon, adult abundance data available only for:
* Upper Rogue winter-run 3,000-11,000 annually, upward trend (1993-1997), 6 percent hatchery fish.
* Upper Rogue summer-run 2300-5500, downward trend (1993-1997), 27 percent hatchery fish.

* Middle Rogue summer-run, steady decline to near zero.
* Applegate winter-run mean of 906, upward trend (1993-1997), 34 percent hatchery fish.
* Based on angler catch data through 1992, most non-Rogue River populations are declining.
* Stray hatchery fish spawning in Oregon streams (11 percent) threaten local populations.

In California, adult abundance data available only for:

* Trinity River, stable at 1300-2800 annually, but 50-90 percent hatchery fish.
* Middle and South Fork Smith River stable (1983-1996).
* Klamath River Basin, declining by 10 percent annually (1980-1997).

Oregon Coast ESU, candidate: Positive indications, but new information available only for small part of ESU.

* Post-1992 data for just three of more than 40 populations.
* North Umpqua winter-run, stable (3400 annual return), with little hatchery fish interaction.
* Salmonberry, North Umpqua summer-run, and Nehalem show stable or increasing trends (uncertain whether these are representative of entire ESU).
* Reduced hatchery fish influence in some streams; release programs stopped in four streams.

Lower Columbia River ESU, threatened: Zero natural populations at low risk of extinction.

* Universal and often dramatic declines since mid-1980s.
* Nineteen of 21 Washington populations depressed.
* Wind River has declined from "depressed" to "critical."
* Hatchery transplants compromising local populations.
* Hatchery fish on spawning grounds far too high: 80 percent in Hood and Cowlitz rivers; 45 percent in Sandy, Clackamas, and Kalama rivers; 75 percent for Kalama summer-run.

What's Next: Many factors limit steelhead recovery, and none of these factors has escaped attention. The only solution to steelhead recovery is a combination of federal, state, tribal, local and private steps, and NMFS will continue its work to collaborate with all parties on recovery. In the two ESUs now protected under the Endangered Species Act -- Lower Columbia and Central California Valley -- federal agencies will be required to consult with NMFS, beginning 60 days after publication of the decision in the Federal Register. Such consultations ensure federal actions contribute to the survival and recovery of threatened steelhead in the California Central Valley and lower Columbia River. NMFS will soon issue tailor-made protections for steelhead in these two ESUs. As state, tribal, local and private initiatives develop that lead to steelhead recovery, NMFS will publish special rules exempting appropriate activities from ESA regulations. In the three ESUs protected by state conservation plans -- Northern California, Klamath Mountains Province, and Oregon Coast -- steelhead will be watched closely for any signs of further decline and need for ESA protection.